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No Foreign Dissem

*Intelligence has an impact
during a major crisis.*

2001/13, Nov 1

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POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE:

The Arab-Israeli War

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Among the developments leading up to the outbreak of war between Israel and its Arab neighbors in June 1967, there were some in Washington that provide one of those relatively rare instances in which the visible impact of intelligence on national policy is specific and clear cut.

A number of circumstances came together to make this possible. First, the basic question which the policy makers asked—who will win if the US stays out?—was sharply defined. Second, the duration of the “crisis,” as far as the production of premonitory intelligence and short-term judgments were concerned, was only some three weeks, from mid-May to dawn of 5 June. The basic issues thus had no time to become fogged over. Third, the impact of the intelligence judgment was the more explosive in that this judgment ran nearly head-on into the initial impressions of some, at least, of the administration’s top advisers.

This last point, which lends drama to the role of intelligence in this episode, is not easy to document. At the time, however, it was nonetheless reasonably clear that in fairly high quarters in Washington the first reaction to Nasir’s opening moves in mid-May—the mobilization of Egyptian forces and their deployment into Sinai, followed by the withdrawal of the UN screening forces there—was to assume that we were witnessing the unfolding of a calculated Soviet-Arab plan to eliminate Israel (and ultimately the US) from the area. Given this assumption, and the strength—at least on paper—of the Soviet-backed Arab forces, it seemed likely that “little Israel” would lose the war being prepared against it. Furthermore, given the extent of the emotional attachment to Israel in this country developed over twenty years in the form of moral if not political commitments, it appeared to follow that the US ought to move tangibly and quickly to Israel’s support. Indeed, a number of US actions early in the crisis appear to have sprung from these assumptions and this logic. Thus,

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the way was cleared for an emergency airlift to Israel of spare parts, ammunition, and, because of the Egyptians' known use of chemical agents in Yemen, chemical defense equipment.

The Intelligence View

The US intelligence community was virtually unanimous in rejecting these assumptions and judgments. Soviet and Arab-Israeli experts were agreed that Nasir's initial moves must have been conceived out of misinformation about immediate Israeli intentions, and that this misinformation had reached Nasir because of miscalculation somewhere in the Soviet apparatus. On the most critical point, it was nearly unanimously agreed that if war came the Israelis would be able to defeat Nasir and the other Arabs combined, and that the Soviet military would not physically intervene. In short, the intelligence community saw no carefully calculated Arab-Soviet plan. It saw instead a Soviet blunder being compounded, to Moscow's embarrassment, by the responses of Arab leaders ridden with the compulsion to react against what they read as Israeli threats.

These contrasting views of the origin of the crisis and of the likely outcome of hostilities first collided at the top policy level on Tuesday, 23 May, the day after the Egyptians announced that the Gulf of Aqaba was henceforth closed to Israeli shipping. On the morning of that date, the President called the Director of Central Intelligence out of a briefing session with the House Armed Services Subcommittee to tell him that Ambassador Goldberg had telephoned from New York, complaining that there had been no warning of a Middle East crisis, and worrying over the possibility of a war which Israel, in Goldberg's opinion, could not win. The President asked the Director for papers on these subjects.

The Director in turn levied these requirements on his deputy for intelligence, asking that the responses be delivered to him before the White House regular Tuesday lunch.¹ The papers—"US Knowledge of Egyptian Alert," and "Overall Arab and Israeli Military Capabilities"—were drafted by a task force² which had been brought into

¹ There were at that moment less than four hours remaining in which these papers had to be finished, prayed over, and delivered.

² A task force in current intelligence parlance is a peculiar invention, not entirely dissimilar in conception from the Manhattan Project, the object of which is to bring into organized relations all who can help the intelligence effort during a crisis.

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being earlier the same morning. (The Egyptian announcement had also triggered the Watch Committee of the United States Intelligence Board, which had been called into special session at 0030.)

The two memoranda, plus a general situation briefing for the Director's own use, were delivered to him in the ground floor lobby outside Walt Rostow's White House office. At the lunch, in addition to the President and the DCI, were Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, General Wheeler (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), George Christian (the White House press officer), and Walt Rostow.

The "who will win" memorandum was clearly crucial. It delivered "the judgment of the intelligence community" that, on the ground, Israel could "hold on any three fronts while mounting successfully a major offensive on the fourth."³ In the air, the Israelis "probably could defeat the Egyptian air force if Israel's air facilities were not damaged beyond repair." This memorandum concluded that, although the Egyptian forces had "improved substantially" since 1956, nevertheless "we consider that the Israeli forces have retained an over-all superiority." On the spot, the President asked Secretary McNamara and General Wheeler whether they concurred in this judgment. After they did so, he ordered both papers delivered to Ambassador Goldberg in New York.

Second Round

Wednesday, 24 May, was devoted by the intelligence community and the policy people to digesting developments and refining their appreciations. A regularly scheduled National Security Council meeting took up problems of South Arabia, while on the intelligence level the USIB Watch Committee met once again to sift the evidence bearing on possible Soviet intervention in the crisis. The Watch Committee concluded that "direct Soviet military involvement" was "highly unlikely."

Next day (25 May), however, activity stepped up.

On receiving this paper, the Director asked the Office of National Estimates to comment. Their paper was completed in five hours.

³ The fronts envisioned were the Sinai, Syrian, Jordanian, and Lebanese.

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were sent post haste to the White House to Bromley Smith, the NSC Executive Secretary. The President himself had not yet returned from a one-day trip to Montreal. At a meeting on the Vietnam problem that afternoon in Undersecretary of State Katzenbach's office, the Director learned from Assistant Secretary of State Eugene Rostow that Israeli Foreign Minister Eban [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] was even then talking to the Secretary of State.

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[REDACTED] The Agency's paper judged that the Egyptian positions in Sinai were essentially defensive, that the other Arabs' troop movements were gestures for political effect, and that the possibility of the Egyptians using chemical warfare could be discounted since the local conditions were most unfavorable. The paper took the position that "the Soviet aim is still to avoid military involvement and to give the US a black eye among the Arabs by identifying it with Israel." The paper concluded that the Soviets "probably could not openly help the Arabs because of lack of capability, and probably would not for fear of confrontation with the US."

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Early on the evening of the 25th, a high-level group⁴ assembled in Walt Rostow's office at the White House. Secretary Rusk, having seen Eban, asked if the Director agreed with ONE's comments [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Told that the Director did indeed agree, the Secretary commented: "Dick, there is only one thing I want to say—as LaGuardia once remarked, if this is a mistake, it's a beaut." The group then moved to the President's office.

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The President had read [REDACTED] and again quizzed the Director and General Wheeler—was the US assessment solid? The President evidently had in mind both the question of Egyptian and Soviet intentions and the "who would win" issue, which Goldberg was still picking at. The Director replied, "we'll scrub it down again," and following the meeting threw the CIA machinery once again into gear, to produce the next day what has a good claim to have been the classic paper of the crisis, "Military Capabilities of Israel and the Arab States."

⁴ Rusk, Cyrus Vance (vice McNamara who was out of town), General Wheeler, Eugene Rostow, and the Director.

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Reassessment and Reassertion

This paper, product of a coordinated effort by ONE, elements of CIA's Directorate of Intelligence and the Defense Intelligence Agency, considerably sharpened but did not in essence alter the assessment given the President by the Director two days earlier. It estimated that the Israelis could attain air superiority over Sinai in 24 hours after taking the initiative or in two or three days if the Egyptians struck first, and that Israeli armored forces could breach Egypt's forward lines in Sinai within "several" days, although the paper foresaw a need for the Israeli ground forces to regroup and resupply before they could move to the Suez Canal.⁵

As for Syria and Jordan, this paper was even more prescient. It judged that the Syrians had no capability for a successful attack and said the Israelis could break the Syrian line, though with relatively heavy casualties because of the terrain and the Syrians' fortifications. Regarding Jordan, the paper estimated that if Jordan undertook more than very limited operations, Israel could occupy most of the West Bank in a few days once major fighting with Egypt had subsided.

This paper was disseminated about mid-afternoon on 26 May. Policy makers therefore had not yet read it when they again convened in the White House Cabinet room that day. They did have, however, an ONE memorandum, "The Middle Eastern Crisis," which spelled out at some length the view of the intelligence community in general and of CIA in particular on how the crisis had come about and how it might develop. The President asked the group, which on this occasion included advisers Clark Clifford and Abe Fortas as well as the officials responsible for national security affairs, to read the paper. Its theses also contradicted the "little Israel under Red attack" view.

While ONE conceded that Moscow might have encouraged Nasir to believe that his forces could stand off an Israeli offensive once they were deployed in Sinai, the estimators did not believe that "the whole operation is a Soviet plan, or that the Soviets urged him to his present course of action." Indeed, ONE said it believed that the Soviets would almost certainly advise Nasir against a military show-down with Israel. Noting that Nasir had won the "first round" and appeared to be standing pat, this paper clearly implied that Israel, facing "dismaying choices," might well react dangerously. The Israelis had

⁵ Original drafts had said "two to three" days would be needed by the Israelis to break the Sinai defenses, and "seven to nine" days to reach the Canal, but this precision was sacrificed in the debate of coordination.

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the choice of risking a military strike, or of acquiescing in the "permanent closing" of the Strait of Tiran. Specifying Israel's dilemma, ONE was "inclined to believe that unless the US and other major powers take whatever steps are necessary to reopen the Strait, the Israelis will feel compelled to go to war." In discussing the Soviet role and probable actions, ONE repeated its earlier judgment that the Soviets would not intervene with their own combat forces, even though Nasir's defeat by Israel would, by extension, be a "grave setback" for the USSR itself.

Although it is nowhere spelled out in the intelligence record, the cumulative impact of these judgments over three successive days evidently led to policy decisions limiting the US material commitment in support of Israel to a fairly narrow range of "defensive" military items. Perhaps more important, it was made clear to the Israelis that, if they chose to take the military initiative, they would have to go it alone. Rarely has the intelligence community spoken as clearly, as rapidly, and with such unanimity. The result was early adoption of a policy posture in consonance with the intelligence judgment.

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Denouement

This was of course not the end, nor by any means the whole, of the story of the intelligence contribution to policy planning up to the early hours of 5 June. Once the Israelis saw where the wind was blowing, they ceased the rather obvious gambits of the pre-May 26 period

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Directorate of Intelligence elements at CIA, configured in the so-called Arab-Israel task force, had meanwhile come to essentially the same conclusion. On 3 June the task force issued to the community a self-initiated memorandum entitled, "The Current Focus of the Near East Crisis," which warned that "all reporting [REDACTED] shows mounting pressure for a 'decision'," while the Arabs, on their side were "sniffing blood." In this situation, the task force emphasized the dangers, physical as well as psychological, to US material and strategic interests in the area, and observed that "the damage to the US position in the area already appears serious." With these documents in hand, the whistle of Israeli jets—and the crash of breaking embassy windows—surely came as no surprise to those who were awakened early on 5 June.

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As indicated earlier, however, the story would be incomplete without some reference to the flood of requests for memoranda which, in addition to the requirements of the regular intelligence and estimative media, inundated intelligence components during this period. The records of the Arab-Israel task force give some of the flavor of those days—and nights: titles included "Exercise of Overflight and Landing Rights in Spain, Libya and Turkey to Deliver Materiel to Israel"; "Nasir and a Future UN Presence Along the Israeli Border"; "Oil Tanker Operations to Eilat" (the shipping people in CIA's Office of Economic Research joined the Navy in scanning every ship about which there was even a suggestion it might enter the Red Sea); "Estimated Costs of Crude Oil Imports to Israel"; "Egypt's Capacity to Support a Sustained Mobilization"; "Reactions to the Forcing of the Strait of Tiran"; "Implications in the Moslem World of Forcing the Strait of Tiran." Nor, of course, did the intelligence community's services to US policy on Arab-Israel questions end with the outbreak of hostilities. But that is still another story.

The story told here is obviously one of a "success." The intelligence community was "right," and the "right" answers reached the very top quickly and in immediately usable form. Were we lucky? Did we merely have on tap, for this occasion, a group of unusually perceptive analysts and capable drafters? In part, the answers are perhaps yes. The present writer, having been one of them, is not inclined to dismiss the idea that talented people were in fact involved. But he is inclined to point out that the judgments were not concocted for the occasion. On the contrary, the community had repeatedly addressed itself to most of these very questions for a dozen years, through

formal estimates and—at least as, if not more important in bringing a body of experts to rub minds together—through the Arab-Israeli Ad Hoc Working Group.

This group, which produced—and still produces—the “Arab-Israeli Handbook,” had been meeting periodically under the aegis of CIA’s Office of Current Intelligence since before the 1956 Suez war. Originally focusing on deliveries of Soviet equipment to the Arab states, the handbook had gradually expanded into a compendium of political and military facts and current military judgments. Moreover, over the years, experts from CIA, State, DIA, and NSA had learned to know each other, to work together, and to debate on the basis of a commonly-shared corpus of information. Thus, when Nasir made his move and the Israelis reacted, the spadework on the central problems had long since been done, and the policy makers could be presented with informed judgments confidently arrived at.

Qs for Dick

Why did the LBJ take to
the PML right away?

When did he begin to ~~take~~
be interviewed?

Is Worman's account

What about VSE briefing
for Johnson?

~~the report?~~ Do you have
any explanations?

check
Worman's
account
for
dates

40. PDB

41. other OOI Publications

42. Vietnam

43. Presidential Topics

44. Miscellaneous

45. WH Relations, General

According to memo control records, 14 memos were produced in answer to specific requests from the White House between 23 July 66 and 30 January 1967.

30 Jan-	Nationalist Irregulars in Burma	Rostow
27	France-Soviet Scientific & Technical Cooperation	WH
18	Communist Chinese Forces in Vietnam (self initiated but dating back to Oct 65 when CIA's initiative generated such interest as to require the introduction of a series; the latest being the sixth.)	
27 Dec	Soviet Progress in Manned Orbital Laboratory Field	VP
14	The Impact of Operation ATTLEBORO	B Smith
22 Nov	North Vietnamese Che Diplomatic Chiefs of Mission	"
28 Sep	Developments in Sarawak	Ropa
22	[REDACTED] STATINTL	"
8	Military Dispositions along Sino-Soviet Border	"
25 Aug	Viet Cong Anti-election Activity in S Vietnam	Komar
5 Aug	The Chinese Position in N. Vietnam	Moyers
30 July	The New Indonesian Cabinet	Ropa
25 July	North Vietnamese Intentions and Attitudes Toward the War	VP (Lester)
23 July	Political Forces in Indonesia	

In addition there were special typescript memos produced on request for cabinet officials. Instability in the Western Hemisphere, a self initiated memo produced previously ~~was~~ and very well received, was updated during this period.

plus 13 memoranda relative to security conditions in all western Pacific countries of Pres. Johnson's itinerary